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Of Puppets, Automatons, and Avatars: Automating the Reader-Player in Electronic Literature and Computer Games

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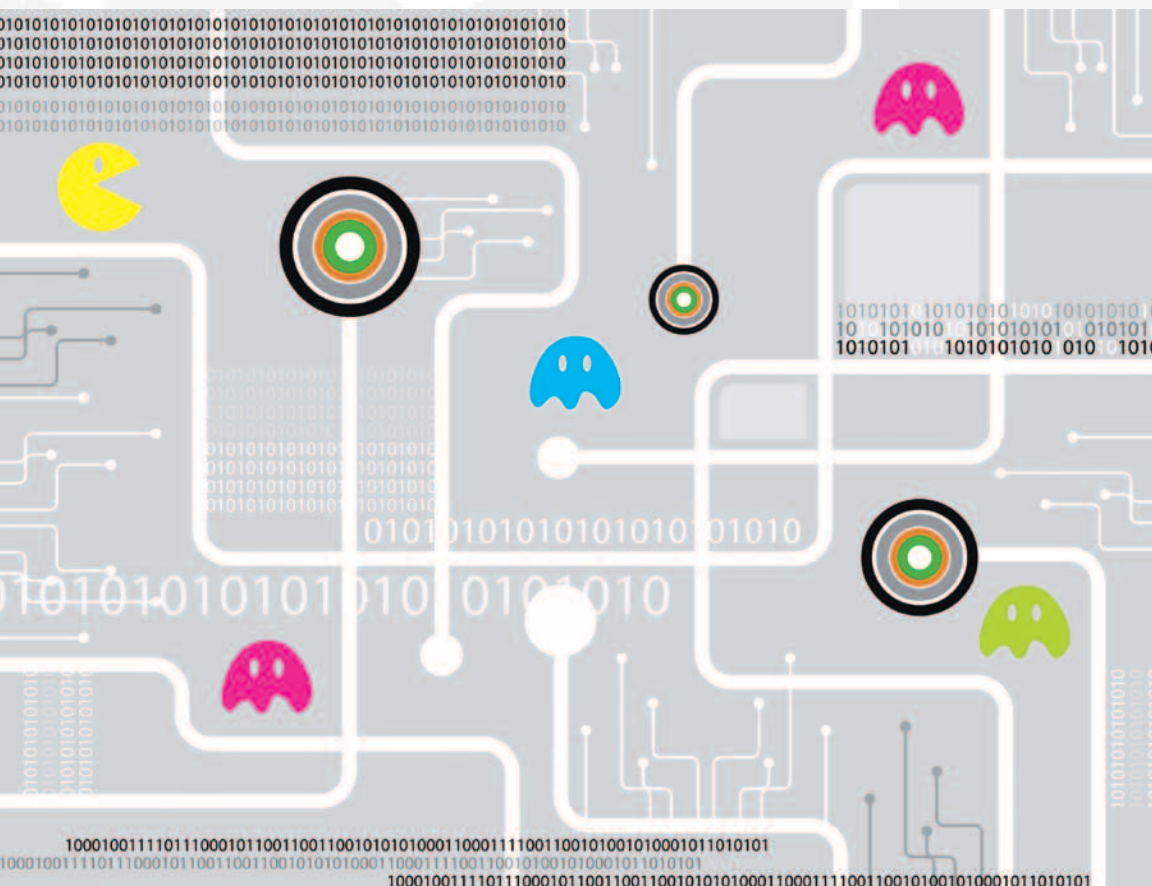
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PLAYING the PAST

HISTORY AND NOSTALGIA IN VIDEO GAMES

EDITED BY

Zach Whalen
Laurie N. Taylor

Playing the Past

History and Nostalgia in Video Games

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and Laurie N. Taylor*

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Of Puppets, Automatons, and Avatars

Automating the Reader-Player in Electronic Literature and Computer Games

Robert P. Fletcher

Grace . . . appears purest in that human form which has either no consciousness or an infinite one, that is, in a puppet or in a god.
  —Heinrich von Kleist, "On the Marionette Theater" (1810)

The Automaton Chess Player, built in 1769, . . . was a machine that seemed to think, and it caused its inventor to be called . . . a "modern Prometheus." The Chess Player was to elicit wonder throughout the world, but Kempelen, an eminent mechanician, insisted that it was only a toy, a trifle he had concocted for the amusement of Empress Maria Theresa. The machine's widespread popularity worried him; he dismantled it, inexplicably, soon after it was first shown.
  —Gaby Wood, *Edison's Eve: A Magical History of the Quest for Mechanical Life* (2002)

[I]t is helpful to remember that by the nineteenth century puppet shows were widely attacked in the same way that comic books, video games, and action movies are today—for crudity, obscenity, violence, and setting an overall bad example for the young.
  —Victoria Nelson, *The Secret Life of Puppets* (2001)

Ambivalence about the human simulacrum has a long history as well as what seems to be a very big future (in video games). Uncanny copies of human beings have been created with strings and cogwheels as well as through computer graphics and have gone by the names of puppet, doll, automaton, android, and avatar. As my epigraphs show, for some time the relationship between the human and its simulation has been fraught with tensions between identifying with or rejecting as the other, and be-

tween experiencing a sense of wonder or of being cheated—no matter whether the simulation be created with cams, code, or even cinema, as in the example of Charlie Kaufman and Spike Jonze's 1999 film *Being John Malkovich*.[1] Looking back on the unsettling figure of the automaton allows both a work of electronic literature (eLit), William Poundstone's "3 Proposals for Bottle Imps" (2003), and a two-part adventure game, Benoît Sokal's *Syberia* (2002) and *Syberia II* (2004), to explore the automation of their own audiences, as well as to ponder the spirit-matter or mind-body dualism that has structured much of modern Western culture. As Gaby Wood points out, the Oxford English Dictionary defines an automaton as either "a figure which simulates the action of a living being" or, conversely, "a human being acting mechanically in a monotonous routine" (as cited in Wood xix). Both eLit and game provide the reader-player with the occasion to recognize in himself or herself "the puppeteer *in the service of* the puppet" (Wood 99) and to recognize in the history of mechanical life an anticipation of current contests over the significance of the simulacrum in the form of the avatar. However, "3 Proposals for Bottle Imps" foregrounds the metafictional dimension even as it engrosses its audience with its own stories of human automatism, while the *Syberia* game immerses its audience in a visually convincing world of automatons and reserves its reflexive moments for the occasional sly remark or technical shock. The difference between these cybertexts in this ratio of diegetic to extradiegetic elements suggests to me that in each the representation of precybernetic mechanical life carries a different valence: the eLit text appears to be most interested in driving home the idea of the materiality of posthuman subjectivity (what Donna Haraway means when she says, "The cyborg incarnation is outside salvation history"), while, conversely, the game seems most interested in uncovering what Victoria Nelson sees as the repressed transcendent in the human form divine. These differing commitments to be reflexive or nostalgic about the "human" have consequences for how the texts construct the history of the human-machine relationship.

Poundstone's Bottle Imps: The Automaton as Machine

Poundstone's "3 Proposals" is a Flash animation, multimedia in nature (with dynamic text, images, and sound) and consisting of three allegories and a list of frequently asked questions (FAQ) (see Figure 14.1). It takes Raymond Roussel's 1914 novel *Locus Solus* as a starting point for critical reflection on the long history of the human-machine relationship

**Figure 14.1. "3 Proposals for Bottle Imps": main menu.
Image © William Poundstone.**

and its current manifestations in digital culture. The FAQ, essential to the reader's experience of the text, explain the bottle imp's function as human simulacrum, reflect on the philosophical challenge it poses to humanism, and link all this to digital textuality:

> In contrast to film, video, or conventional animation, eLit is a form of visual story-telling in which characters are mostly invisible, blurred, or glanced from a distance. Though this is sometimes put down to temporary limitations of posing and animation software, eLit is fundamentally a medium of artifice—of symbols that are perceived as symbols . . . *Locus Solus* is mainly about machines (or in one chapter, dead people who been reanimated into a mechanical, puppet-like simulation of life.) [*sic*] Roussel presents a world of avatars, virtual personages that look, move, and talk like people; beings capable of soliloquies though not conversation or introspection. This could equally describe the digital realm today.

Bébé's skeleton is now in the Musée de l'Homme (next to that of a giant), and a wax image is in the Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum, Brunswick, both of which are to be consulted in the modeling of the bottle imp's figure of Bébé.
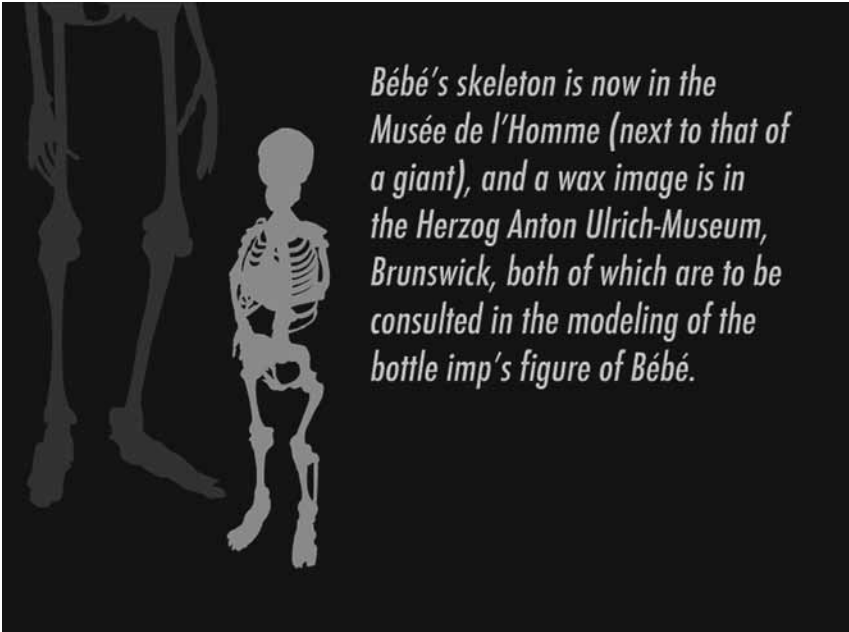
Figure 14.2. "3 Proposals for Bottle Imps": Bébé's remains.
Image © William Poundstone.

Poundstone's allegorical narratives, especially the one on envy, illustrate the mechanization of the human being, thus functioning as both proposals for "absurd automata" akin to those in Roussel's novel and "always already the stories themselves, set somewhere else in space and time (and eternally looping in 'our' time frame)." Since those narratives take the form of Flash animations, the automated stories are in some ways, as they run and then loop automatically, always already the automata themselves. In other words, they don't just tell the stories; they enact or model them with image and sound.

Poundstone's "allegory of envy" tells the story of an eighteenth-century dwarf, Nicholas Ferry, nicknamed Bébé, who is initially a marvel of nature for members of a European court but then comes to be seen as an inferior machine or a faulty toy when a second, better-behaved and better-educated dwarf arrives on the scene. Bébé proves his humanity by his revengeful rage against his competition, but when he dies his skeleton is preserved in cognac and exhibited again as an uncanny marvel in a *wunderkammer* or cabinet of curiosities.

Ultimately, as the e-text both recounts and illustrates, Bébé's remains

while preserving quality of life...

Swansea has attracted £160 million investment in **smokestack-free industries**

it was a stroke of marketing genius

Figure 14.3. "3 Proposals for Bottle Imps": "Ambition."
Image © William Poundstone.

are "retained for their scientific value" and displayed in a museum (next to a giant), as is a wax reproduction of this human being who was taken for a doll (see Figure 14.2). The story exemplifies the vexed relationship of the human and automaton in the Western world's imaginary. As Wood puts it in her examination of the lives of "The Doll Family," a German brother and three sisters by the name of Schneider who survived as living dolls in a twentieth-century America of freak shows and Hollywood munch-kins, "Instead of wondering if automata were human, people now asked themselves how such purported humans could contain the requisite 'ma-chinery'" (217). For Poundstone, Roussel's bottle imp simulates this ready potential for the human to be construed as the mechanical.[2] In its staging of the fight between the temperamental Bébé and his beatific counterpart Joujou, the allegory of envy also represents the battle between the two versions of the automaton haunting Western culture, as either wickedly nonempathic or benignly prelapsarian.

The metaphor of person as machine has become central in Western culture since the advent of industrialization, and Poundstone engages this history obliquely in "An Allegory of Ambition," a proposal/bottle imp

that satirizes the industrialized world's attempts to erase its uglier aspects through things like civic pride and technological progress. The proposal begins with a silhouette of Dylan Thomas and his oft-cited words of contempt for his hometown, "Swansea is the graveyard of ambition." The second largest city in Wales, Swansea has been a casualty of de-industrialization (memorably depicted in the 1997 film *Twin Town*) and the proposal/bottle imp tells the story of its civic leaders' attempts to counter such a reputation by trumping the poet's observation with a slogan, "Ambition is critical," which they engraved "in brass letters on a granite pavement in Swansea City Centre" (the artwork actually turns up in the film). Poundstone explains that the engraving has become detached from its original context and inspired a marketing campaign by recent city leaders, who have designated Swansea "the City of Ambition." At this point, the proposal/bottle imp animates Swansea's ambitions by combining an energetic melody, an urban skyline that covers over the green Welsh countryside, and dynamic text phrases such as "component assembly," "website design," and "biotechnology," and then informing the reader-player that the city has indeed attracted a lot of investment in "smokestack-free industries" (see Figure 14.3). However, as the melody continues to pulse along ambitiously, the morphing text points out one more irony—that working-class youth have been left behind by this techno-economic progress and hang out at the City Centre, where they leave liquor bottles and rewrite the city slogan in graffiti as "Ambition is Crap." Poundstone's imp captures these ironic transformations and the contest over the meaning of post-industrial society they represent by reproducing the letters of the slogan in magnets that are mechanically, reflexively rearranged at regular intervals into anagrams like "claims it's a bit ironic" and "I am a strict iambic lion." Thus, this allegory and its bottle-imp automaton moralize on the lingering effects of an industrial disease that Thomas implicitly criticized and Western societies are eager to transform through carefully controlled public relations and new technologies.

Sokal's *Syberia* Games:
The Automaton as Human Divine

> The Voralberg reputation crossed the oceans, dispatching its fine precision mechanisms across the globe to delighted buyers who began to believe that Voralberg automatons had a life of their own.
>   —"Welcome to Valadilene" brochure in *Syberia* (2002)

Figure 14.4. *Syberia*: automaton mourners. Image © Microïds.

When we turn to the adventure game *Syberia* and its sequel (or comple-
tion, actually), we find a cybertext that tries through impressive graphics
and interactive storytelling to reenvision the wonder of the automaton,
even as it gestures at its dark side. The game begins with a cutscene of the
funeral of Anna Voralberg, the owner of an automaton factory, whose
hearse is attended by creepy mechanical mourners. The combination of
near-cinematic realism in the sequence, mournful strings in the back-
ground, and the presence on the scene of the player's avatar, the relatively
fleshlier American lawyer Kate Walker, creates an uncanny moment, as
both Kate and the player apprehend an illusion of life in this return of the
dead (see Figure 14.4). Victoria Nelson has argued that the human simu-
lacrum has traditionally been one way to access the holy, but that,

> [i]n our officially postreligious intellectual culture, we miss the
> idols . . . Just as the mad scientist figure carries the negative but still
> highly charged projection of the holy man who would otherwise
> have no place in our living culture, the repressed religious is also
> visible in representations of puppets, robots, cyborgs, and other
> artificial humans in literature and film. It endures as a fascination

Figure 14.5. *Syberia*: the Voralberg crypt. Image © Microïds.

with the spiritualizing of matter and the demiurgic infusion of
soul into human simulacra—a fascination that manifested itself, in
the twentieth century, both in avant-garde theater and in popular
entertainments (comics, films, and cybergames). (20)

Syberia takes the New York lawyer's growing acceptance of that spirit-
matter relationship and its implications for her life as its very subject.
Originally sent to the depressed town of Valadilene in the French Alps
to acquire the factory for "the Universal Toy Company […] a multi-
national which has a monopoly on the toy market," Kate must abort her
mission, descend into the crypt (or in Nelson's terms the grotto, source of
the grotesque) (see Figure 14.5), and retrieve the clues that will help her
pursue a quest to find the long-lost inventor of the automatons, Anna's
brother Hans Voralberg, who as a boy fell from a height when reach-
ing for a toy mammoth he found in a Lascaux-like cave with his sister
and emerged from the resulting coma as an idiot savant whose innocence
mimics that of his creations (or vice versa). Along the way, Kate must re-
ject the calls (via cell phone) of boss, fiancé, friend, and even mother, who
all insist that she return to the artificial, affect-less relationships she has

WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR THEN? WIND THEM UP! FIND A WAY! THERE MUST BE SOME SORT OF TRAIN WINDING THING JUST LAYING AROUND IN THIS WEIRDO STATION!
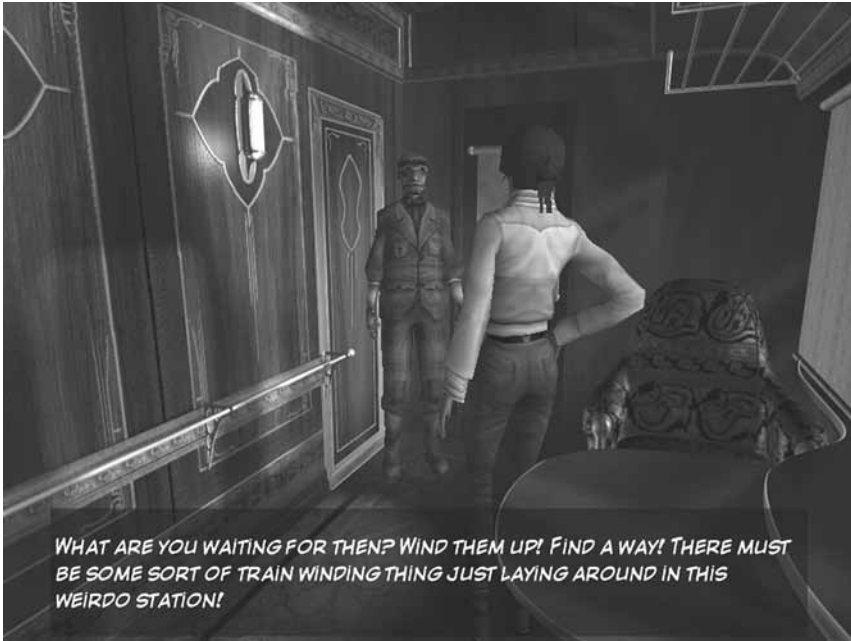
Figure 14.6. *Syberia*: **Oscar and Kate. Image © Microïds.**

been maintaining in the "real world" of corporate America; in promising instead to help Hans reach a mystical island of mammoths called Syberia, she reclaims her own repressed sense of the transcendent. She is aided and hindered in her quest to find Hans and take him to Syberia by various good and bad automaton-like characters, such as the "simple" child Momo; assorted unhelpful, robot-like clerks, storekeepers, and bartenders; and, most importantly, an actual automaton—the latest model, with an "additional soul auxiliary"—a mechanical railway engineer named Oscar (see Figure 14.6) who drives the marvelous wind-up train that takes Kate on her journey into Eastern Europe and Russia. Oscar plays something like the subaltern role of C3PO to Kate's Luke Skywalker, manifesting a charmingly naive (or stubborn) literal-mindedness at times and at one point becoming the victim of a scavenger of automaton parts who resides in an old Soviet mine.

That particular stop on the journey reveals that Hans has worked for the Soviet government following WWII, and this part of his history allows the game to engage, as it does occasionally, that other meaning of the automaton, the human who is taken for a machine. But whereas Poundstone's eLit examines the long shadow cast on Western cities by industrial

ITS TRUE VALUE AND THAT YOUR AUTOMATON CREATIONS ARE TAKING THE
PLACE OF WORKERS FOR ALL THOSE MENIAL JOBS. I AM SO PROUD THAT
VORALBERG AUTOMATONS ARE MAKING SUCH A CONTRIBUTION, EVEN IF IT IS

Figure 14.7. *Syberia*: **Soviet imagery, linked to Hans's automatons.**
Image © Microïds.

history, Sokal's game exports that history to Eastern Europe and Russia.
In interviews, Sokal has spoken of his fascination with the former Soviet
Union (see Figure 14.7):

> When I started to think of "Syberia" I though[t] that there were no
> places for explorers anymore, except in the former USSR. All these
> countries were hidden behind the "iron curtain" and we knew very
> little. I was also amazed by places such as the Sea of Aral and the way
> some people thought that they could just change the nature [*sic*].
> (Wajer)

In the game, the West is represented primarily by the silhouette of Kate's
obstreperous boss, law partner Edward Marson, who presides in a fuzzy,
soft-lit boardroom that looks out onto an iconic Manhattan skyline. Al-
though Kate originally goes to a fictional town in the French Alps to buy
the closed factory, the signs of post-industrial depression and alienation
are reserved by-and-large for the East. The "journey from West to East"
advertised in the teaser for the game is also a journey back in time, from

A TRAIN SHOULD FIRST STOP, THEN SUBSEQUENTLY LEAVE. THAT IS THE RULE!

Figure 14.8. *Syberia*: **bureaucratic automatism. Image © Microïds.**

a transformed, powerful West of acquisitive multinationals to a languishing, inefficient Russia of rusted machinery. A recovered voice cylinder from Anna to her brother reveals that the marvelous Voralberg automatons played a role in the post-war modernization of Soviet industry:

> But it's so good to hear that your talent is being recognized for its true value and that your automaton creations are taking the place of workers for all those menial jobs. I am so proud that Voralberg automatons are making such a contribution, even if it is small, to the improvement of people's lives.

Not surprisingly, this tale of an infusion of fantastic technology from the West and the subsequent salvation of the dehumanized worker doesn't explain the consequences of such sudden unemployment for a Soviet society wherein a guaranteed job and the relative prosperity of the 1950s and 1960s were among the few bright spots of economic history (Hanson 48–70). Now, however, these wonders have been abandoned, with the implication that not only innovative technology but its maintenance must

come from the West. The human characters and automatons that Kate, Oscar, and later Hans encounter along the way are likewise dysfunctional and barely surviving in a world of junk and refuse, and the puzzles in the game often involve getting the machinery up and running.

The meaning of automaton as mechanized subject is also at play in a more humorous context when Kate's train is stuck in Barrockstadt, site of a university whose rectors, in a satire of bureaucratic automatism, do what they can to block the heroine's attempt to get on her way again because she is not following the rules, while at the same time insisting that she must move her train. "Out of the question!" one shouts when Kate explains that her train must sit while she finds the clues to get it moving again, "Trains should first stop, then subsequently leave. That is the rule!" (see Figure 14.8). This is one of several spots in the game where the clunky adventure-game convention of clicking down a list of dialogue topics and getting canned responses repeated to you over and over actually reinforces the narrative and thematic context. The rectors (as well as those obstructive storekeepers) are supposed to sound like automatons, and indeed they do.

This soulless life in corporate America and post-Soviet, post-industrial Russia is countered in the game by the spirituality of the Youkals, the indigenous people whom Kate encounters in Part Two. Seemingly modeled on a myth belonging to the Nenets, one of the "small peoples" of the Yamal Peninsula in Northern Siberia, the mysterious Youkals live apart from Russians in underground villages and maintain a culture built around domesticated mammoths, the bones and hides of which constitute the raw materials of Youkal technology.[3] Youkal legend centers on a magical "ice ark" that periodically traveled to the north and brought back frozen mammoths with which the modern Youkals fed and clothed themselves. Kate finds the ark in dry dock and must reinitiate its journeys to the lost island. In fact, the game ends when, upon reaching Syberia, Kate reunites Hans with the marvelous in the form of real, live mammoths like those that he had found on the island when he had left home as a young man decades before, and she thereby enables him to cross over into a spiritual realm. This end to the quest links the game's use of the automaton to represent the repressed spirituality of the West with what Nelson terms the "'colonized transcendent'—that is, the twentieth-century Western fascination with the religions of pretechnological cultures around the world, which amounted to an allowable means by which to experience vicariously one's inclinations toward the holy" (12).

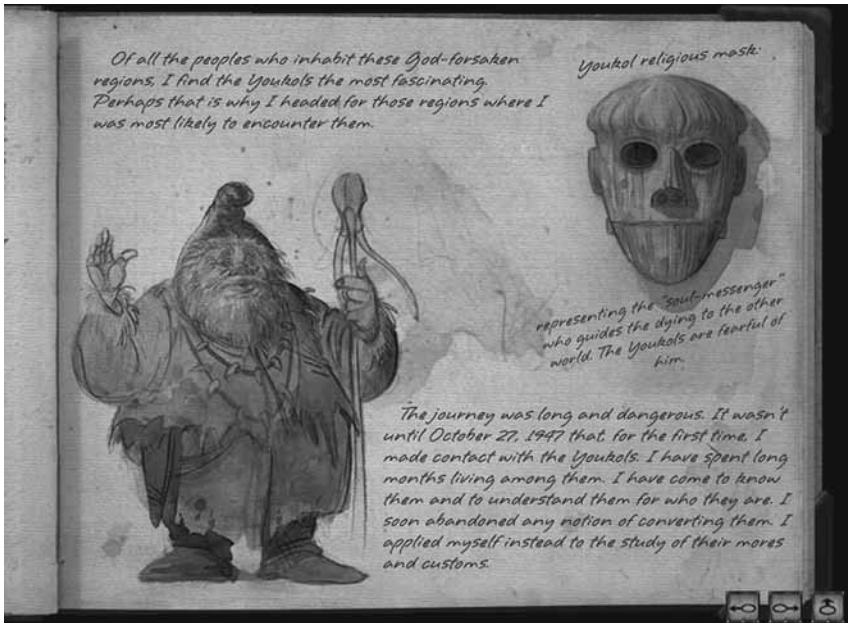Indeed, the *Syberia* games take full, if not always conscious, advantage

Of all the peoples who inhabit these God-forsaken regions, I find the Youkols the most fascinating. Perhaps that is why I headed for those regions where I was most likely to encounter them.

Youkol religious mask:

representing the "soul-messenger" who guides the dying to the other world. The Youkols are fearful of him.

The journey was long and dangerous. It wasn't until October 27, 1947 that, for the first time, I made contact with the Youkols. I have spent long months living among them. I have come to know them and to understand them for who they are. I soon abandoned any notion of converting them. I applied myself instead to the study of their mores and customs.

Figure 14.9. *Syberia II*: Youkol ceremonial mask resembling an automaton. Image © Microïds.

of the Romantic myth of the noble savage. Cultural anthropologists and historians of Siberian colonization write of the contradictory values attached to the small peoples of the North in Russian culture. Much like Native Americans in the United States, the indigenous peoples of Siberia have been seen as exotics that are alternately ridiculous and sublime, monstrous and angelic, backward and pure (Diment and Slezkine 3–5; Slezkine 33–35; Mandelstam Balzer 6 and 51–52). Sokal invests the Youkals with an authenticity missing from the corrupt and decrepit Russian towns through which the heroine and her train pass, linking them (like the automatons) to a timeless world immune from political economy. The game even provides an ethnological study of the Youkals in the form of a priest's journal, and the native mask therein resembles an automaton face (see Figure 14.9). However, Mandelstam Balzer and others have demonstrated the complexity of the history of the Siberian peoples since Russian expansion to the east and north began in earnest in the eighteenth century. Russians came to dominate southern Siberia, "uneasy interdependence" characterized northern towns and villages, and only in the northern "backwoods" did the cultural practices of the indigenous

**Figure 14.10. *Syberia II*: Youkol train station built of mammoth tusks.
Image © Microïds.**

peoples remain dominant (Mandelstam Balzer 29–53). In the Soviet
Union, "Siberian peoples were considered to be less advanced along the
Marxist scale of historical progress," but the government saw itself as he-
roically bringing "the indigenous population out from timelessness and
[...] into history" at an accelerated pace (Grant 227). There is a hint of
such social divisions in a minor episode of the game, where the hierarchy
of Romansbourg is reflected in the town's layout, with the train station
and depressed commercial interests of the ex-communists sitting on plat-
forms high above a poor, vaguely "ethnic" population represented by the
orphan girl Malka. Colonel Emeliov, left in charge of this "last bastion of
civilization," explains that "low down is low down, and high up is high
up. People who are low down got different points of view from those who
are high up. Different kettle, different fish, if you get my meaning, Miss
Walker." When Kate suggests that she may explore the sub-station, he
warns her that "all the undesirables of the plateau wash up in our little
town sometime," and he responds to her objection to this line of thinking
with the defense that he is merely "carrying out a soldier's orders."

By and large, though, the reality of the Siberian peoples in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is lost to a vision of a remote, untouched society of shamanic rituals and technological marvels constructed from native materials (à la TV's *Gilligan's Island*), such as a train station of wood and mammoth tusks (see Figure 14.10). The Youkals' monopoly on religious ritual in the game (despite the train's stop at an Orthodox monastery) represents, I believe, an example of what Renato Rosaldo has called "imperialist nostalgia," in which the "agents of colonialism long for the very form of life they intentionally altered or destroyed" (69). Eggert has extended this concept to include texts that reproduce the indigenous culture "as tribute or museum display" (75). This nostalgia links the Siberian peoples intimately with the other agent of transcendence and innocence in the game, the human divine in the form of the automaton. Indeed, I would contend that the game purifies its mechanical technology through association with the indigenous peoples. Soviet and Russian "exploration and exploitation of gas and oil fields on Yamal has gained in importance at both the national (Soviet/Russian) and international levels" since the 1960s and has led to the

> loss of pastureland owing to allotment for oil and gas development and related transport; damage to additional areas from industrial activity; contamination of rivers and sea-coast areas by oil, oil products, and other chemical agents; damage to bird, mammal, and fish breeding grounds, habitat, and migratory routes; and destabilization of the permafrost. (Golovnev and Osherenko 11–13)

In Sokal's vision, the marvelous wind-up train, carrying its inventor, mechanical operator, and American passenger, brings no exploitation or pollution and little damage to the environment, with the exception of some comic relief in the form of two bumbling villains who want to capitalize on Hans's genius. Once past the Russian towns, Hans's train takes Kate through pristine, gorgeously rendered landscapes and eventually comes to rest before the hidden Youkal village itself, where it is dragged inside by the natives to its final resting place. Kate and Hans transfer to the magical ice ark for the final leg of their journey to the island and the mammoths, but only after the automaton Oscar sacrifices himself to restore the dying Hans to health in a scene that brings together the wonders of technology and shamanism. Oscar's demise takes place under the auspices of the Youkal shaman, who nonetheless shows surprise when the automaton self-destructs. She then pulls a lever that lowers Hans, suspended from

Figure 14.11. *Syberia II***: Hans's transformation echoes Frankenstein. Image © Microïds.**

Figure 14.12. *Syberia II***. Image © Microïds.**

her hut roof in a shot reminiscent of cinematic versions of both *Franken-stein* (1931) and *A Man Called Horse* (1970), into the waiting remains of Oscar, which are assimilated to Hans's frail body, transforming the inno-cent creator into a cyborg god capable of making the trip to Syberia (see Figures 14.11 and 14.12). Thus, the repressed transcendent is accessed through a unique combination of romanticized images of technological invention and "primitive" culture.

Reflexivity in Game and Electronic Literature

In its combination of satire and quest, *Syberia* sets up a structural contrast between the mechanical and soulful characters and, unlike Poundstone's "Bottle Imps," it seems at times unaware of the artifice of its nostalgic narrative. At some points, it does play self-consciously with the ambiguities of the automaton by exploiting the pervasive irony of a human simulacrum (our avatar) watching various other human simulacra (the automatons) and reacting with wonder at the sublime sight (see Figure 14.13). Moreover, one subplot offers a self-reflexive parody that suggests an awareness of the issues in gaming such as gender and power, and fetish and desire. If Kate Walker is not exactly Lara Croft (reaction to her appearance from contributors to the "Syberia Blows" forum thread at *idlethumbs.net* was mixed, ranging from "she's hot!" to "bloody non-descript euro-chick"), she is nevertheless a female avatar created by a male artist. In the promotional short *The Making of Syberia* as well as in an online interview, Sokal expresses something like paternal pride in Kate's ingenuity and ability to solve her problems with intellect rather than violence: "I simply like to show women who are not just 'like man' (i.e., using weapons, fighting)" (Wajer). However, the game also includes a parody of the Pygmalionism at work both here and in the long history of male artists and their female muses. A phantom haunting the derelict Soviet mine steals Oscar's hands and will return them only if Kate retrieves an opera singer he has worshiped for years so she can perform for him one more time. He shows Kate his shrine filled with simulacra of Madame Helena Romanski, but once Kate fulfills her part of the bargain he traps the diva, whom Kate must free (see Figure 14.14). Thus, the game has fun with a *Phantom of the Opera* parody while slyly raising the issue of the author's and possibly the reader-player's fantasy of manipulating the female figure.[4] It is also during this episode near the end of the game's first part that one of its more explicitly self-referential moments occurs. As Kate prepares to take Helena back to the mine for her performance, she receives a cell-phone call from her friend Olivia, who gushes with affected guilt over an indiscretion with Kate's fiancé Dan. When Kate responds that this doesn't seem "real, right now" and that she needs to "process this new bit of data," Olivia warns her (and us) that she is (and we are) becoming an automaton in her (and our) abandonment of conventional commitments for this single-minded quest to find the inventor of a set of marvelous automatons. The quest is invested with genuine affect in the game, though represented here by Olivia as an obsessive, mechanical

Figure 14.13. *Syberia*: Kate's reaction. Image © Microïds.

compulsion, while the melodramatic confession, we find, is "soulless," as Olivia quite quickly recovers her good spirits when she finds Kate doesn't care about the cheating. In the meantime, with a nudge and a wink, the reader-player has been reminded of his/her own compulsion to succeed in the game's quest and of the possibility that in identifying with Kate he/she may indeed be becoming an automaton of sorts.

For the most part, however, *Syberia* seeks to immerse its player in its surreal Eastern Europe and Russia—this world of decaying industry, wondrous automatons, and ancient magic—despite surprises such as this episode, when the player is prodded to reflect on the relationship between him/herself and the simulated identities through which he/she is living at the moment. In the eLit text "3 Proposals for Bottle Imps," this metafictional critique is the primary focus. Poundstone links cybertextual literature to Roussel's modernist experiments in narrative form, claiming that both marginalize the human and are instead "mainly about machines." Like the modernist novel, eLit calls attention to its own mediation of reality:

Figure 14.14. *Syberia*: a madman's shrine to an opera singer. Image © Microïds.

> In contrast to film, video, or conventional animation, eLit is [a]
> form of visual story-telling in which characters are mostly invisible,
> blurred, or glanced from a distance. Though this is sometimes put
> down to temporary limitations of posing and animation software, eLit
> is fundamentally a medium of artifice—of symbols that are perceived
> as symbols.

For Poundstone's reader, a main lesson of the encounter with the automa-
ton should be an awareness of story as machine; like the modernist text,
the eLit machine is estranging. He effects that estrangement in part by
manipulating the Flash animations with virtuoso skill. In each allegory,
music, dynamic words, and images pulse along together—images and text
morphing, music looping—the machine in control of the reader's experi-
ence of the text, and thus in control of the reader. The reader's time must
be the machine's time. In a 3D graphic environment, that dimension of
'real time' action may add to the effect of immersion, but with the tex-
tual automation of eLit, I think the feeling of a less than 'human' expe-

Figure 14.15. *Syberia*: a display bug reveals Kate to be another kind of puppet. Image © Microïds.

rience more probable. I find this hypothesis confirmed by my students' experience of the work of other eLit artists besides Poundstone who have exploited this mechanization of the textual experience. For example, a pair of web artists calling themselves Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries has published Flash narratives and monologues told in a spare, synchronized combination of mostly instrumental music and plain black text on a white background.[5] In their "Orient," the thoughts of young singles in a bar speed along at an almost unreadable pace to keep up with the jazz soundtrack. As the *Iowa Review Web* has put it, "Writing in three different languages, Young Hae Chang and Marc Voge strip away interactivity, graphics, photos, illustrations, and colors to leave viewers with language and sound." My students expressed both fascination with and a feeling of alienation from their cybertexts.[6]

While immersion, a transparent virtual reality, and the hiding of the "story-telling illusions" may be the goals of many game designers, several theorists of games have pointed out that there always resides in the experience of any given game the potential for the medium to reveal

itself—for the puppet's strings to be exposed. Fencott categorizes various kinds of "perceptual opportunities" in games as "sureties, shocks, and surprises," with shocks being those moments of poor design when some element jars a user out of his/her sense of "presence." A rather grotesque example of such a shock comes in the first part of *Syberia* should the player decide voluntarily to leave Kate Walker for even a moment by hitting Alt-Tab on the keyboard. When one tries to reimmerse in the pleasure of the game, one is confronted with a mutilated avatar, the lower face of which has been effaced and whose status as the most human character in the world—evidenced importantly by a mouth that is both handsomely simulated and the source of Kate's affect-laden speeches—has been thereby thrown into doubt (see Figure 14.15). Kate Walker is revealed to be one more automaton. But I would argue that more than such accidental shocks, the very interface and gameplay of this adventure game, and of adventure games in general, work to undermine the illusion of presence, to reveal the automaton in the reader-player, and thereby to link it in another way to the self-imposed marginalization Poundstone claims for electronic literature.

Conclusion: Requiem for a Game

> Simulation is not a new tool . . . However, the potential of simulation has been somehow limited because of a technological problem: it is extremely difficult to model complex systems through cogwheels. Naturally, the invention of the computer changed this situation.
> —Gonzalo Frasca, "Simulation versus Narrative: Introduction to Ludology" (2003)

In the past it may have indeed been difficult to create a persuasive model through mechanical means, but both Poundstone's "3 Proposals for Bottle Imps" and Sokal's *Syberia* demonstrate how long-standing is the fantasy of succeeding, and the game in particular acknowledges the pleasure of the fantastic to be found in the mechanical wonder, even if it does so self-consciously. But this game and others of its kind have also been criticized for disallowing the kinds of pleasures other games provide—for not simulating some kinds of affective experience well enough, for breaking the illusion. I want to conclude this essay with some speculations, inspired by the juxtaposition of electronic literature and adventure game, about why adventure games get under some people's skin. What gets talked of in terms of superior and inferior designs may also have something to do

with the paradoxes of time and eternity that the automaton once again teases out in our thought.

In a review of the sequel to *Syberia* in *Computer Gaming World*, Charles Ardai praises the "breathtaking visuals" of the follow-up (though, he notes, "the periodic injections of wonder and delight don't come as often as they did" in the predecessor), but he also complains of the gameplay in a way that makes the *Syberia* games stand in for the entire adventure-game genre:

> We've come a long way since the days of the first *King's Quest* games in terms of graphics, sound, animation, and interface design, but you're still moving a little figure around, picking up objects here and delivering them there, scouring each screen for just the right spot to click on, and mechanically plowing through dialogue trees. (90)

He concludes that this limitation—the mechanical nature of the gameplay—will keep this adventure game and by implication most others from converting "naysayers." What interests me about such a complaint—and Ardai's is a perspective representative (I think) of a lot of game reviewers—is that it inverts the value of what some theorists say is the peculiar pleasure of computer games: that they exploit their audience's taste for rehearsing procedural behaviors, or what Grodal has termed the video game's focus on "coping strategies" (147). Grodal argues that video games allow one not just to hear about people or events (as in a narrative), but to manipulate them: "Video games are . . . the full, basic story that the retelling has to omit, including its perceptual and muscular realization." The exigencies of our day-to-day lives often center around such a need to manipulate the world around us (e.g., floss our teeth, back the car out of the driveway, incorporate the butter into the sauce), but, in first-person stories, claims Grodal, "such 'procedural' experiences are often not very interesting for other people, they do not like to hear about all those 'low-level' procedures and learning processes, but only to get to the bottom line, whereas video games communicate such procedural knowledge" (148). They "provide an *aesthetic of repetition*, similar to that of everyday life," and the end result of "the learning process [involved in playing a game] is what the Russian Formalists called *automation*." In some cases, we seem to like behaving like automatons.

So it may not be so much what happens in adventure games that turns off some players—my hunch is that it is more about how long it takes to do things and what that element of duration forces upon the player.

Grodal points out that the emotional experiences most taken advantage of by the first-person shooter and similarly intense games are of the "fight and flight" variety (151). But, he continues, an adventure game like *Myst* or *Syberia* exploits "associative and contemplative situations and feelings." Grodal genders these affective experiences and the gaming styles that support them rather predictably, but what strikes me is the emphasis on contemplation that the adventure game shares with the literary text (whether electronic or not). Even more important than the "aesthetic of repetition" to the adventure game (which it can indeed exploit beyond the endurance of many) may be the "convention of notice" at its center, a term I borrow from Peter Rabinowitz's discussion of the literary reading process (47). Here's David Richter's explanation of the idea:

> In some stories, an author might describe the street on which the narrator lives and mean nothing more by it than the dateline to a newspaper story, but in the style system in which "Araby" is written (modernist realism), any elaborate description can almost be counted on to have thematic significance going beyond face value. (236)

In an adventure game or a modernist short story or a dynamic eLit text, the user is pressed to notice everything, and that takes time—whether that is the mechanical beat of machine time ("it's going too fast, I can't keep up!"), or the slow-motion of the second reading of the short story, or the "tedious backtracking" of the adventure game. In demanding that the user take time to notice everything, especially the artifice, the adventure game may have condemned itself to museum status, making itself one more marvel of automation to be appreciated by the few willing to take time to reflect on the mechanism.

Notes

1. For a brief discussion of the "exchange of souls between the puppeteer and his cohorts" in *Being John Malkovich*, see Nelson 215–16. Both she and other cultural historians trace the links extending from puppetry through mechanical automata to present-day computer simulations. For example, see the delightful description of the nineteenth-century acrobat puppet or "false automaton" named "Antonio Diavolo," who "operated not by clockwork but by pistons and pullcords," in Stafford and Terpak 273. Their individual discussions of the history of puppets, automata, and other "devices of wonder" demonstrate how complex and yet consistent the imaginary functions of human simulacra have been from the times of Hero of Alexandria until now. See for instance 35–47 and 266–74. Another espe-

cially good example of the wonder associated with both the automaton and the human simulacra in cinema (specifically, the early films of Georges Méliès) exists in Brian Selznick's graphic novel for children *The Invention of Hugo Cabret*.

2. The bottle imp, he explains in the FAQ, "is a toy consisting of a gas-filled figurine sealed in a container of water. By changing the fluid pressure of the container, the figure may be made to rise and descend." Thus, both Roussel and Poundstone in their separate media (novel and Flash animation) focus on the reality effects of pointedly crude simulacra.

3. I have not been able to identify definitively the specific people on whom Sokal modeled his Youkals—he may have had in mind the Khanty, the Nenets, or some other group. For a good introduction to the complex indigenous societies of Siberia and their history with the Russians, see Slezkine. To me, the mythic dimensions of the Youkals most closely resemble the Sihirtia of Nenets legend:

> Sihirtia, the legendary small people once gone and still living underground, are considered to be the Nenets' predecessors on the tundra, sometimes hostile but more often friendly. They can appear on the earth only at night or in a mist. Underground they pastured earthen reindeer (mammoths), whose "horns" are used for the door handles of their pit houses. They seem to be skillful blacksmiths and magicians, presenting iron or bronze objects to people. (Golovnev and Osherenko 28)

4. See Rehak for a discussion of the complex negotiations of identification and rejection between player and avatar in computer games.

5. For a list of links to their various works, see their homepage, *www.yhchang.com*.

6. About "Orient," one student, Elizabeth Sammonds, wrote,

> That poem confused me because there was obviously something the poet was trying to say but it was so fast you I [*sic*] couldn't get a full grip on anything and when I would finally get something I would try to remember it but that then became a problem because I would forget it trying to keep up with the rest of the poem. I think that poem would have been more effective had it been shorter[;]

while another, Daniel D'Aprile, responded,

> I enjoyed the rushed pace of the poem, and I forgave the accompanying presence of jazz because it helped with the frenzied pace—I saw this as what Kerouac might have attempted had he access to html. A writing so rushed, constant and cacaphonous that it could only compare to the wild, uncontrollable music of Jazz.

(Online discussion at *blackboard.wcupa.edu*, 15 November 2004, for LIT 400: Reading Cyberliterature, West Chester University.)

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